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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAMAKO 000587

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SUBJECT: REBEL LEADER IYAD AG GHALI ON BAHANGA, ALGIERS
ACCORDS AND AQIM

REF: A. BAMAKO 00544

[B](#). BAMAKO 00582

[C](#). 06 BAMAKO 01243

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), met with the Ambassador on May 30 to discuss the case of Ibrahim Bahanga, the status of the "special" military units, security in the north, and ag Ghali's planned departure from Mali. Soft-spoken and reserved, ag Ghali showed nothing of the cold-blooded warrior persona created by the Malian press. Seemingly tired, he said President Amadou Toumani Toure had already accepted his request for an assignment to the Malian Embassy in either Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Ag Ghali said the GOM viewed fugitive rebel Ibrahim Bahanga as a "lost cause" following Bahanga's May 11 battle with the Malian military. He hinted, however, that he was nevertheless keeping up with Bahanga's whereabouts. He reported that the GOM had agreed in principle to create three "special" military units in accordance with the Algiers Accords, but planned to stand up only one unit for the time being. Discussions over the unit's commander - either Hassan Fagaga or Moussa Bah or others - are still on-going. Ag Ghali said Tuaregs were willing to accept an increased Malian military presence in the north and also requested greater U.S. involvement. He said that while few if any northern Malians agreed with AQIM's extremist ideology, AQIM was determined to remain in Mali. He recommended "targeted special operations" that could disturb AQIM operations in the north, but noted that such operations may not be sufficient to remove AQIM completely from Malian territory. End Summary.

Ag Ghali Wants Out

2.(C) Iyad ag Ghali, the Tuareg rebel leader and head of the Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), visited the Embassy on May 30 to meet with the Ambassador and poloffs. The wide-ranging meeting lasted slightly more than an hour. Contrary to the image of a cold, calculating opportunist advanced by the Malian press and members of the Malian government, ag Ghali appeared soft-spoken and unassuming. He said he traveled with his family from Kidal to Bamako in May to "re-establish" his contacts with Malian authorities and accelerate the implementation of the Algiers accords. He is also attending meetings of the High Council of Collectivities (HCCT), to which he was recently re-elected.

3.(C) Ag Ghali confirmed rumors of his plans to depart Mali, saying he was tired of the problems in the north and tired of being blamed for them each time they arose. He said he intends to step back from his role in the ADC and that President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) has already accepted, in principle, his request to be assigned to a position without a portfolio at the Malian Embassy in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Ag Ghali was vague on the ADC's future following his departure. He suggested the ADC could be converted into a political association which was, he said, the ADC's original intention.

Bahanga's Rebellion

4.(C) Ag Ghali said continued mistrust between the GOM and Tuaregs is the main factor hampering the implementation of the Algiers accords. He reported that this mistrust eased somewhat following the ADC's quick condemnation of Ibrahim Bahanga's May 11 battle with Malian forces in the northern town of Tinzwatene (ref A). Ag Ghali confirmed previous reports that ADC leaders had put Bahanga's name forward as one of Kidal's eight representatives to the HCCT in March in hopes of providing Bahanga with a fresh start (ref B). "He needed," said ag Ghali of the notoriously unpredictable rebel, "a new occupation."

5.(C) Ag Ghali felt Bahanga appeared to take to the idea of being an elected official rather than a rebel, saying he even campaigned in Kidal for the HCCT elections. Indications of Bahanga's restiveness, however, materialized prior to Mali's April 29 presidential election when Malian troops apparently searched Bahanga's camp in Tinzwatene. Ag Ghali attributed

BAMAKO 00000587 002 OF 003

Bahanga's actions to a personality conflict between Bahanga and the Malian military officer Ali Gamou. Malian soldiers commanded by Gamou apparently had another confrontation with Bahanga in Tinzwatene in early May, prior to the battle on the 11th. According to ag Ghali, Bahanga believed the Malian military was singling him out for harassment. Nigerien Tuaregs associated with the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ) apparently encouraged Bahanga to fight back.

6.(C) Ag Ghali said 13 Malian Tuaregs had fled to Niger with Bahanga, in addition to the Nigerien members of the MNJ. When asked if he knew Bahanga's current whereabouts, ag Ghali said Bahanga was, as of three or four days ago, near the Malian border in Niger. Although he didn't openly say it, ag Ghali appeared to be keeping up with Bahanga's movements. Ag Ghali felt that, as far as the Malian government was concerned, Bahanga was a "lost cause." He indicated disappointment with Bahanga's decision-making, but did not go so far as to indicate whether he had also given up on rehabilitating his mercurial ADC colleague. He did say that Bahanga did not share ideological ties to AQIM Algerian Salafists operating in northern Mali, but could turn to AQIM for tactical reasons if he finds himself cornered. Ag Ghali said he was not overly concerned about adventuresome young Tuaregs joining up with Bahanga but admitted that the risk remained.

"Special" Units Still Under Construction

7.(C) Ag Ghali said he hoped his presence in Bamako would accelerate the creation of the "special" military units created by the Algiers accords. He said the GOM was hesitant to stand up the units due to fears that re-integrated Tuareg soldiers would use the training and equipment provided to re-play the 23 May 2006 attacks on military outposts in Menaka and Kidal. Ag Ghali said he was working with Malian authorities to allay these concerns.

8.(C) According to ag Ghali, the GOM is moving forward with

the creation of one "special" unit, of Tuaregs and others, to be based in Tin-essako. He said the GOM and Tuaregs were in the process of deciding who would command this unit. One potential scenario under consideration involves naming Col. Hassan Fagaga as the overall commander of the "special" units. Because Fagaga is widely regarded as unreliable by the Malian military (based on a hand gesture he made at this juncture in the conversation, Ag Ghali seemed to indicate he joined the Malians in this assessment), he would likely be restricted to Kidal and play little to no operational role. A second, operational commander based in Tin-essako would actually lead the unit. Moussa Bah, another ADC leader, is a potential candidate for this post.

9.(C) Stumbling blocks include the role of the "special" units within the Malian military, the level of resources and training allotted to the units, and the selection of unit commanders. ADC members are apparently concerned that the GOM is minimizing the "special" units' role within both the Malian military and northern Mali. Ag Ghali noted that the GOM currently intends to provide the first "special" unit with only three vehicles.

AQIM Influence in Northern Mali

10.(C) Ag Ghali said one of AQIM's weak points was that not many people in northern Mali buy into its extremist ideology. He said that the ADC and northern Tuaregs had repeatedly asked AQIM (then known as the GSPC) to leave northern Mali in 2006, even going to the point of encouraging the Algerian Salafists to take advantage of the amnesty program offered by the Algerian government. AQIM refused, arguing that the territory it occupied belonged to neither Mali, nor the ADC, nor the Tuareg people, but to God. Ag Ghali said that after the two fire-fights between the ADC and AQIM in October 2006 (ref C), AQIM tried to undermine the ADC with an information campaign that distributed Arabic language leaflets describing AQIM's doctrine and goals to local nomads.

11.(C) Ag Ghali estimated that the AQIM had little to no support amongst the native populations of northern Mali, but that dislodging the group remained difficult. He repeatedly

BAMAKO 00000587 003 OF 003

said that, in his view, the only way to impact AQIM was through "targeted special operations." He said that while surgical strikes could seriously disrupt AQIM, defeating AQIM would be difficult due in large part to the vast area of empty space they inhabit.

Security and Economic Development

12.(C) Ag Ghali outlined three security challenges facing northern Mali: banditry, discontented rebels like Bahanga, and AQIM. He said the "special" units could handle the first problem on their own but that Bahanga and the Nigerien MNJ complicated matters. We need, he said, the Malian government to handle Bahanga and AQIM. Ag Ghali reported that Tuaregs were prepared to accept an expanded Malian military presence in the north. He also requested U.S. assistance for the new "special" units.

13.(U) Ag Ghali raised the need for increased economic development in northern Mali several times. He described the continued lack of economic development as northern Mali's most pressing challenge and urged the U.S. to undertake more training and job creation programs for Tuareg youth.

Comment: A Few Positives but More Unknowns

14.(C) The ADC appears committed to the idea of mixed Tuareg and non-Tuareg "special" units attached to the Malian National Guard. They also are amenable to expanding the Malian military's footprint in northern Mali - long a serious point of contention between northern populations and the central government. Ag Ghali's request for increased U.S. involvement in northern Mali is also noteworthy. The discussion also revealed several points of concern. The GOM appears to have made little progress toward implementing the Algiers accords since the March 23-24 Kidal development forum, having been consumed instead with preparing for the April 29 presidential elections. Further progress likely depends on the composition of President Toure's new government, which may not be named until late August or early September. As a result, the accords implementation process is stalled, the steering committee overseeing the implementation process is in disarray and the Algerian Ambassador who brokered the deal and served as the key mediator has returned to Algiers to serve in a new position. Ag Ghali said that tells his ADC colleagues to wait until after the elections - apparently meaning both the April 29 presidential election and the July 1 and July 22 legislative elections. The patience of many ADC members, however, is clearly wearing thin. Another area of concern is life after Iyad. While some believe ADC spokesperson Ahmada ag Bibi is ag Ghali's most likely successor, others doubt whether ag Bibi can hold the ADC together. One would expect that Fagaga and Bahanga have their own views on who should lead the ADC once ag Ghali is gone.

McCulley